The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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No. 100 September 24th, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

I must express my gratitude, and I have no doubt that of many of you also, to those who so generously and splendidly took care of the News-Letter during my absence. It is a good education for the editor to read News-Letters written by other people; and, apart from this more general benefit, I have learned much from what was actually written. The thought of the News-Letter has been substantially enriched by these contributions.

RUSSIA

One of my friends, who doubtless never dreamed that his words would be reproduced in the News-Letter, writes : " I am glad you are on to Russia, will keep on Russia and never leave Russia. I can't get it out of my head that they may be the folk (both good and bad) whom the King called in to the Wedding of Heaven and Earth (a very 'material' affair) when the clergy mislaid their invitations. Not that Russia won't be left speechless too, if they fail to realise the nature of the feast." That is very much how I also *feel* about Russia. I do not even begin to understand the Russian enigma ; but the strange way in which the destinies of our two countries have become linked seems to me one of the most exciting events in history.

One thinks, in the first place, of the extraordinary and unexpected succour which the Russians have brought to us. We cannot easily find words to express our emotions. Again one cannot help thinking of the difference it might have made to the world for many generations, if things had gone the other way—if by one means or another Russia had been drawn into the German orbit. It would have given Hitler the chance of launching an ideological attack on the West in the name of " the real social revolution," and of using this pretext to fasten his unholy system on the necks of the people of Europe.

Then there are all the unimaginable possibilities of the future. With the participation of Russia in the war the whole post-war problem is fundamentally transformed. If the Allies are victorious the settlement will not be, as we have been too ready to assume, substantially an Anglo-Saxon settlement. The Russians are nearer geographically to the peoples of eastern Europe. They have probably a better understanding in many respects of the mentality of the European masses than we have. They are bound to have a large say in regard to the future. The thought fills many people with dread. But we have to get rid of fear if we are to grapple successfully with the tasks of the future. It is far better to allow our imagination to be kindled by the hope of what the Anglo-Saxon aud Slav peoples can give to one another out of their diverse experiences. The fact that Russia may have a big hand in the reshaping of Europe clears the air by dispelling the idea that the reorganisation of Europe is primarily a problem of foreign policy. If Great Britain and Russia have to co-operate in finding a solution, the *social* reorganisation of the continent has obviously become the dominant question, and everything will depend on the social conceptions and aims of the peace-makers.

In all this we must avoid being carried away by romantic speculations, which are quite different from a penetrating, imaginative understanding of the situation and its possibilities. The fanatical atheism and the tyranny of Communism are a grave danger. There have been barbarities, persecutions and cruelties on a greater scale than in Germany.[1] These evils we must frankly face, and with equal frankness face the evils of capitalism.

Nor, in thinking of Russia and ourselves, can we leave out of the picture what is happening among the other peoples of Europe. A friend on the continent writes to me that the people of Europe are being greatly changed by their present experiences. Their standards of value are different from what they were two years ago. They are discovering new meanings in the simple realities of family, country and work. They are living in a dialectical tension and are being forced to seek a new positive answer to the European situation as a whole.

To go back to the Russian alliance, the vital matter is to do what we can to know and understand Russia. We must forge every link we can between ourselves and Russia, not merely in the military and economic field, but in cultural and spiritual matters. As an elementary introduction to the subject there could be nothing better than the small volume in the Penguin series, entitled *Russia*, by Sir Bernard Pares.

SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS

With News-Letter No. 104, on October 22nd, we shall complete our second year. More than 2,000 subscriptions will fall due with this issue. Last October, when 2,700 subscriptions ended, more than 2,000 were renewed. We hope for even better results this time. With a view to easing the strain on our staff we are sending renewal notices several weeks in advance. Some of you will find a reminder form enclosed, and others will receive it in the next three weeks. It will greatly help us if you renew your subscription within a week of receiving the renewal order form.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

[1] These facts explain why Christian opinion in Switzerland, which has been strongly opposed to National-Socialism, is nevertheless reported as tending to regard Germany's war against Russia as a fight for European civilisation. This fact needs to be understood, however true it is that there could be no greater negation of the European tradition than Nazism.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER

SEPTEMBER 24TH 1941

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Supplement to C.N-L. No. 100

ECUMENICAL CHRISTIANITY AND THE WORKING CLASSES

Reflections on the Supplement by Mr. W. G. Symons

I. FROM THE BISHOP OF BRADFORD

You ask me to comment on Mr. Symons' article under this title which appeared as the C.N-L. Supplement of July 30th. There is very much in it with which I heartily agree, and I am grateful to him for the admirable way in which he has analysed a situation of which I have become increasingly aware. I spent the first thirty years of my life in the atmosphere of the south country middle-class and the academic environment of the Oxford of 1900. Since then I have spent thirty years in industrial centres of the midlands and the north. I am bishop of a diocese which, I have been told, was nicknamed "the nonconformist diocese." Certainly Nonconformity has been the dominant religious force in the West Riding ever since Wesley ; and I have many parishes in my diocese where a methodist chapel was in existence thirty, forty, fifty years before there was a parish church.

I cordially endorse what Mr. Symons says as to the sanity and soundness of the social life in many industrial districts of the north. The increasing economic stress of life—as well as other causes—has impaired these qualities. But you can still find flourishing, or at least active, among the industrial proletariat of the north a local community life of a type which is not seen, so far as I know, in the south; and it is a life which is still to a large extent shot through and through by religion. The industrial north takes a far more vital interest in religion than the industrial south ; and I know that one of our greatest newspaper proprietors, projecting a symposium on "After-death," proposed to hold it in the northern editions of his paper, because of his conviction of this fact.

This system of life undoubtedly contains its tyrannies. There is for instance the tyranny of "the mill" in Yorkshire, which is as pervasive as any squire-archy. Of one parish it is commonly said that unless you "work at the mill, attend the methodist chapel, and shop at the co-op," you will not be able to live there ; and similar conditions prevail in other mill-villages of the area. The old antagonism between church and chapel has largely (though not entirely) lost its bitterness ; but the chapel has not lost the memory of its dominance as a church society. There is also that "servitude of the pulpit" of which many nonconformist ministers complain, envying the Anglican parson the greater liberty of speech and position which they believe him to possess.

But the system has compensating advantages of a very rich sort. (1) It has established religion as a real item in the community life of the working-classes. It promotes rich piety, goodness, and sacrifice. And I have no sort of doubt that the religious tone of such life in the north is a real asset for the sanity of industrial England. (2) It has been a real nursery of democratic freedom. It has produced in the northern working-class a capacity for spontaneous organisation and responsible leadership, which expresses itself not only in an uncouthness of speech and behaviour which at first startles and repels the newcomer from the south, but also in a self-dependent sturdiness

which is extraordinarily fascinating as you get to know it better.

I also agree with Mr. Symons in what he says as to the power of Nonconformity in the formation and development of this tradition of life. The whole working-class movement in the north was cradled in Nonconformity. It has never found Anglicanism so congenial to its temper. I think Mr. Symons exaggerates when he says that Anglicanism appeals only to " the less progressive and intelligent " of the working-classes of the north. That is not true in the cases—unfortunately still rare—where the parson is not a hopeless specimen of academic Toryism ; and in these days such cases are becoming more frequent ; indeed there is probably more freedom of speech on economic and social affairs among Anglican parsons than among nonconformist ministers, owing to the greater independence of their status. The tide to some small extent has turned ; and if clergy would more generally use their councils as a general staff and give to them greater responsibility in the management of church affairs—however awkward and difficult the result might sometimes be—the tide would run quicker. But the tradition of parsonic dictatorship dies hard. The working-classes of the north still resent the fact that the parson has the final " Say-so " in all church matters. The institution of Parochial Church Councils has to some extent mitigated this autocracy ; and in Yorkshire these councils can sometimes be self-assertive. But Anglicanism is not a purely democratic system and nothing can make it so. It has the quality of its defect, but it also has the defect of its quality. Mr. Symons says that the influence of Nonconformity in the life of the northern proletariat is wilting. This is certainly true, if one may judge by statistics of chapel attendance, of Sunday Schools and Bible Classes, and by the weakening of the class-meeting. The social tradition of the chapel is still strong, but its spiritual influence is less. But I doubt whether Mr. Symons goes deep enough in assessing the causes for this decline. He finds them in the growing " respectability " of Nonconformity, in the fact that its ministers are increasingly college-trained and academic in their outlook and are becoming " middle-class " in their status and standpoint. That is true, but it does not go deep enough. I should say that the change was due to more fundamental causes :

(1) To the growing secularisation of English life and education and politics. " Labour " has ceased to be a moral crusade and has become a political party. And working-class activities no longer start with the assumption that Sunday and the Bible are sacrosanct.

(2) To the growing imposition of the economic obsession on man's view of himself. Bishop F. T. Woods once called Bradford a " brass-bound city." Certainly industrial life in the north has become " brass-bound " ; and the effect of living life systematically on this assumption is bound to show itself in the lesser value attached to the religious motive.

(3) But more than this, it seems as if modern Nonconformity offers too little to feed the spiritual needs of the working-classes of our times. It generates individualistic piety ; but Mr. Symons is right when he criticises the flatness and triviality of its worship : and the weakness of its doctrinal presentation. The spiritual side of religion plays far too little part in modern Nonconformity by comparison with the social side. We find the same tendency at work in northern Anglicanism, and in many parishes the parish hall is more the religious centre of life, than the church. But in Anglicanism the tradition is at least against this tendency, though it has to fight hard to maintain itself. In Nonconformity the tradition is itself weak ; many a chapel is more effectively a social than a spiritual centre. And neither pietism nor moralism will satisfy the spiritual needs of the working-classes of these days. The religious prospect is uncertain ; but it seems fairly clear that there is no future for any religion which is not alive to the primary importance of doctrine and mystery.

Here, if Anglicanism but knew it, lies its chance. It has a strong and fine tradition of worship and of doctrine. Its emphasis on " priesthood " assures this. But it still needs to learn in practice that, just as episcopacy need not mean prelacy, so spiritual priesthood need not mean a class aristocracy. We —I speak of course as an Anglican—need a far wider system of training our clergy, and much more flexibility in the principles on

which we select them. At present we are still largely tied to the tradition of the academically trained gentleman ; we must try to find some way of placing in our ministry men who have really emerged from the ranks of working-class life. Our lay reader system does not really meet this condition.

But this is a matter for purely Anglican consideration. On a wider view, what seems to be needed is this, that on to the Anglican tradition of priesthood and stewardship of mysteries should be grafted that immensely sound and healthy nonconformist tradition of lay responsibility, which has produced all that is best in the nonconformist proletariat of the north. The weakening of Nonconformity has not meant a corresponding invigoration of Anglicanism ; we derive no satisfaction from the tale of emptying chapels. At present we are both missing the mark, for both are maintaining a partial tradition. How the fusing of these two elements is to be achieved is a problem of enormous difficulty. But it is well worth the attention of those who direct the counsels of the ecumenical movement. For finally, I entirely agree with Mr. Symons that this whole movement has been too exclusively an affair of academic discussion amongst ministerial hierarchies. The Christian News-Letter cuts no ice among working-folk and in the industrial districts. It still has the flavour of the universities and of London and the south predominant in it. It still discusses doctrine and administration in the terms of middle-class intellectualism and diplomacy. Meanwhile the still living tradition of Christian community—life, as we find it, though impaired, in the industrial north, goes on waiting for the time when it may be taken up into a larger synthesis, which shall accommodate it together with the other elements, which in an ecumenical Christianity—however primary their importance—must not claim or be allowed to monopolise the whole field, to the exclusion of the simpler—however crude—pieties and realities of the non-intellectual Christians, of those " common people " who heard Christ gladly. It is to the lasting honour of Nonconformity that it has done so great a work in eliciting the contribution which these people can make to a Christian order of society. It will be a lasting weakness of the ecumenical movement if it cannot find the terms in which to bring about a reconciliation between this tradition and that of Anglicanism in a common Christian culture.

II. FROM AN ANGLICAN PRIEST

I am extremely interested in the valuable Supplement which W. G. Symons contributed to the News-Letter of 30th July. It seems to me that what he said needs saying loudly and within the hearing of those who are keenest on recognising the *Catholic* tradition within Anglicanism. I hope that any who read this will re-read the article, for what I am saying is, but underlining from my personal experience, something of what he has put excellently in an impersonal manner.

As I am writing from personal experience it may be excusable if I mention a few facts connected with my personal history. I was brought up in a working-class home in Nonconformity. At the age of " revolt " I reacted into the trade union and socialist movement and studied for a while at both Fircroft and at Ruskin Colleges. Having been won back to the Christian faith, of rather a " liberal " and socialist type, I joined up with some friends and tramped the industrial areas of Britain speaking in the open air and living in the homes of the workers as a " tramp preacher." In this period of five years, I had plenty of opportunity to assimilate the religious " feeling " in various parts of the country. After a time in Cambridge preparing to take Orders, in touch with the Catholic tradition of the Church I went on to the industrial Tyneside for three years, from there to an industrial parish in Coventry for two years and have now spent three years in a mining district in Northumberland where the issue which Mr. Symons raises is of real importance.

In this area, when I came, it was assumed that Anglicanism was dead and Nonconformity was dying—but I have been more and more impressed by this deep-rooted tradition which I believe is a very real asset

if we become conscious of its value. In our community there now exists a very real friendliness between these two traditions of Nonconformity and Anglicanism and many men have entered the Church for the first time for years. But the fact which faces many of the mining communities is that much of the direct social life has passed from the chapels and churches. In many it is the working men's clubs which absorb the activity of the men. But the welfare committees organised by the miners themselves are transforming the life of many communities. In my district a large private residence in spacious grounds is now converted into a welfare centre and it is playing a very real part in the development of a higher social life for all, one in which the padre is always welcome, but in which his influence is indirect.

I have often tried to get my clerical friends, representing the younger generation and the Catholic tradition, to realise that there is a very real religious tradition which is " native and indigenous to the industrial proletariat," and to recognise that the folk still belong to one or other congregation and that it is a factor of real importance and hope in our task. But only too often my espousal of this cause has been greeted by my friends as a relic of " liberalism," which is with them a term of abuse. I entirely agree with Mr. Symons when he says that what he urges "is not a plea for nineteenth-century liberalism." It is perfectly true that, whatever may be the drawbacks of their theological standpoint, the workers " show a realism in devotional life, in practical grasp of the essentials of the faith, as well as in political tactics, which leaves the ' realistic theologian ' standing—in spite of his theological formulations." Surely this tremendous, though latent power should be utilised, instead of being ostracised, by the conscious effort of all who are striving to develop the ecumenical movement within the Churches.

III. FROM A LAYMAN WITH WIDE EXPERIENCE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Your News-Letter with the supplement by W. G. Symons was to me one of the most interesting you have issued. I was brought up in a somewhat similar atmosphere. The externals were different ; but the religion of nearly all the people was a live thing, and in a sense they literally " walked with God." That does not suggest that they were saints or anything of the kind, but they were constantly conscious of and ardently believed in the immediate Presence in every aspect of life. Until the last generation you would have found the same situation in many parts of Scotland or of Canada. My experience of the Anglican Church is not great, but I have been an observer of it for thirty years, and I believe that there is very little of that particular and most important spirit in it. The spirit was intolerant and narrow in many cases, but it was very real and meant a great deal to every aspect of the life of the community.

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